

Gospel at the Cross (2) — Two Criminal Responses

Outline

1. The First Criminal — his words and meaning
2. The Second Criminal — his words and meaning
3. Jesus' response to the Second Criminal — His words and meaning

Introduction: I remember the time, many years ago, when, as a new Christian, I met a wealthy Hindu gentleman and a Christian missionary. The Hindu asked, "How can it be that a very evil man, when he is about to die, should say sorry to Jesus and Jesus would forgive him and take him to heaven?" The Christian missionary answered, "Because Jesus is wonderful!" The answer did not convince the Hindu because it needed processing. I will try to process it here by comparing the last words spoken by the two criminals and Jesus before all three died by crucifixion.

Read Luke 23:32-47

1. The First Criminal—his words and meaning (*Luke 23:39*) The first criminal turns to Jesus and says, *"If you are the Christ, save yourself and us."*

(Note: Christ or Christos in Greek means Messiah in Hebrew. It means Anointed One and Chosen One)

The first criminal joins the unbelieving crowd and soldiers around the cross, mocking Jesus (*Luke 23:35-39*). They all said, "If you are the Messiah and King, save yourself." The glorious truth is that Jesus is the Messiah and King. He could save Himself, but He wouldn't be able to save us. He came to save us by dying for us in our place. It's the Gospel, the good news.

But the first criminal didn't fear God, had no sorrow for his sinful life, and couldn't see Jesus's innocence. The second criminal rebuked him for all that (*Luke 23:40-41* *But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?"* ⁴¹ *We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."*)

The first criminal uses the language of a self-centred person in v39. He says to Jesus, "Can't you see I am suffering and about to die an excruciating death? So, **IF** you are what you claim to be, then get me out of here". Millions of unbelievers say something very similar. They may say, "**IF** you are indeed God, get me out of my troubles. But **IF** you don't do what I ask, then I am not interested in you." God will not answer them because of their self-centeredness. A problematic word they use in their prayer is "**IF**". The moment they use the word "**IF**" shows their centre is themselves, and God is on the outside at their beck and call. There is no humility, no acknowledgement of sin in their lives and no fear of God. Of course, Jesus did not answer the first criminal.

[However, I have come across some people who used the word "IF" and said to God, "IF you are truly who You say You are, answer my prayer, and I will follow You." And God answered their prayer, and they followed Him. To these people, God knew the sincerity in their hearts to follow God as King of their life. And God answered them.]

When believers adopt a similar attitude, they are testing God. They, too, are self-centred and will also get

no answer. And when they make this a habit, they will make **no** progress in their walk with God and their spiritual life. They are ungrateful for what Jesus has done for them on the cross. Therefore, always be grateful for what Jesus has done for you on the cross and always remember to include thanksgiving in your prayers (Phil 4:6-7, 1 Thess 5:16-18).

*Phil 4:6-7 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, **with thanksgiving**, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*

*1 Thess 5:16-18 Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ **give thanks in all circumstances**; this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

2. The Second Criminal — his words and meaning: Luke 23:41-42 *We are punished justly for getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.* ⁴² *Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

The second criminal acknowledges that he is a very sinful man and deserves his punishment. But he doesn't ask for relief. Instead, he believes Jesus to be innocent of wrongdoing, and Jesus has a kingdom, so He is a king (v42). All he wants is to be in Jesus' kingdom. The second criminal realised he was self-centred and had done horrible things his entire life. Now he wants to replace the centre of his life with Jesus as King. He doesn't use the word "IF" like the first criminal. He understands what many don't, that throughout his life, with himself as the centre; it got him into big trouble. He is fed up with that kind of self-centred living. So, he humbles himself and asks Jesus to be the King of his life. Jesus is not just a Saviour that wants to get you out of the mess you got into because you want to be in the centre of your life. Jesus can only get you out of your confusion when you make Him your King. The world is a mess because we are self-centred people. Unless you replace your old self with Jesus as Lord in the centre of your life, you will not get to see nor enter the kingdom of God where there is righteousness, peace and joy (Rom 14:17).

3. Jesus' response to the Second Criminal — His words and meaning: Luke 23:43 *Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

When the second criminal accepts Jesus as Lord, Jesus takes him into His kingdom. On what basis could Jesus do this?

Because judgment for our sins fell upon Jesus on the cross—symbolised by supernatural darkness covering the land. (vv 44-45 *It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵ for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two*). For further notes, read Gospel at the Cross — 1.

The second criminal asks Jesus, "*Remember me*". Instead, Jesus answers, "You will be with me." This means the second criminal will enjoy heaven with Jesus. But there's more to it. The Bible explains in the following verses:

Eph 2:1-9 *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were, by nature, deserving of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive **with Christ** even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up **with Christ** and seated us **with him** in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.*

We deserved the wrath of God (v3), but God raised us **with Christ** and seated us **with Him** in heaven (v6).

Raising and seated us **with** Him means we enjoy what Jesus enjoys — the incredible love within the Trinity. We receive all this when we accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord, irrespective of our sinful past.

John 15:9 [Jesus says] “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.”

John 17:23 [Jesus says, “You, Father] have loved them even as you have loved me”.

Rom 8:16-18 *The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. ¹⁷ Now, if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and **co- heirs with Christ**, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. ¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*

We become God’s children when we receive Jesus as our Saviour and Lord. God will not judge us. Instead, He now becomes our helper. There is an inward sense of sonship (v16) by which we can call Him Abba Father. There is the promise of present and future inheritance. But just like our elder brother Jesus, we will receive the cross and the crown that the gospel promises (v17). The way of the cross is the only path to the glory awaiting “**co-heirs with Christ.**” The Gospel means strength for trials, not escape from them. However, through all the trials as Christians, we remain confident that we are God’s children.

A.W. Tozer (1897-1963) writes, “Our great honour lies in being just what Jesus was and is — to be accepted by those who accept him, rejected by all who reject him, loved by those who love him and hated by everyone who hates him. What greater glory could come to any man?”

End Notes:

“**The Skull**” is the crucifixion site (Luke 23:33). In Aramaic, it is called Golgotha, which means the place of the Skull (Matt 27:33, Mark 15:22, John 19:17). The English term “Calvary” comes from the Latin word “Calvaria”, which also means “The Skull”. The name “The Skull” is probably because the Romans used it as a place of execution, or perhaps the mount looked like a skull. The exact location remains to be discovered to this day.

“**Paradise.**” Luke 23:43 may refer to the “New Creation” (Isa 51:3) as recreating a type of the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:8-10). But paradise refers to eternal life beyond the grave (2 Cor 12:4).